

America's Obsession with Student Testing: Costs in Money and Lost Instructional Time

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Abstract

A study of two medium-sized, urban school districts' standardized testing calendars indicated that students are being deprived of a full, high-quality education because of pervasive test preparation and testing. Educators know the importance of gauging student learning, and they support the proper use of standardized testing and sensible accountability measures. However, the current test-and-punish accountability system under the No Child Left Behind Act has diminished vital parts of the curriculum that are not subjected to accountability testing, sacrificed student learning time to testing and test preparation, and forced teachers—particularly those teaching at-risk students—to focus their attention on students achieving just below the passing score. That is not what countries with high-performing education systems do. We need a testing system that informs, rather than impedes, teaching and learning.

Historically standardized tests have been loosely linked to accountability and student learning. Since the enactment of *No Child Left Behind* in 2001, however, the connection between student learning and high-stakes standardized testing is more prominent. Now, because of NCLB, all 50 states have some type of standardized testing, whereby students are tested annually, usually beginning in 3rd grade. The rationale behind this connection is that increased pressure to do well on standardized tests, together with a set of rewards and punishments, will increase student learning and achievement.

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The logic underlying test-based educational accountability appears to make sense, because educators can efficiently determine what students have learned by testing them (Popham, 2011). However, a test-based accountability strategy that was originally intended to improve our schools is now having the opposite effect (Popham, 2009).

Testing Does Not Increase Learning

Testing does virtually nothing to support or increase student learning (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Solley, 2007). High-stakes testing negatively affects motivation and learning and limits and narrows the curriculum. No longer is teachers' professional judgment about curriculum and instruction valued. Students' fear of failure on high-stakes tests has lessened their motivation to learn (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2007). And an overemphasis on testing can undermine the pursuit of excellence (Bulach & Lunenburg, 2011).

High-stakes testing has radically changed the kind of instruction that is offered in American public schools. Instruction has been reduced to teaching to the test. The test becomes the curriculum. Important skills that schools once taught, such as critical thinking, discussions, and problem solving, are being replaced by low-level "practice item" drills. Teachers devote significant portions of their class time to unending "drill sessions" in which students must respond to test-like practice exercises. These dreary practice-item drills soon remove any pleasure students might otherwise have for school.

Testing More, Teaching Less

Testing More, Teaching Less: What America's Obsession with Student Testing Costs in Money and Lost Instructional Time (Nelson, 2013), examines the instructional and financial costs of testing in 2012-2013 in two medium-sized, urban school districts—one located in the Midwest, the other in the East—through the prism of their standardized testing calendars. The report is the first of its type since *No Child Left Behind* became law in 2001.

Over the years, the time taken up by test preparation and testing has risen, as have the costs and the lost instructional time. The report (Nelson, 2013) revealed through a grade-by-grade analysis of time and money invested in standardized testing that test preparation and testing absorbed 19 full school days in one district and a month and a half in the other in heavily tested grades. The Midwestern district spent \$600 or more for standardized testing per pupil in grades 3-8; about \$200 per student for grades K-2; from \$400 to \$600 per student for grades 9-11. The Eastern district spent more than \$1,100 annually on testing per student in grades 6-11; around \$400 per student in grades 1-2; between \$700 and \$800 per student for grades 3-5.

One of the districts gives 14 different assessments to all students at least once a year in at least one grade, according to the report, and some assessments are administered for several subjects multiple times a year, resulting in 34 different test administrations. The other district had 12 different standardized assessments but 47 separate administrations over the course of the year. The report indicated that students can spend 60 to more than 110 hours per year in test preparation in high-stakes testing grades. Including the cost of lost instructional time (at \$6.15 per hour, equivalent to the per-student cost of adding one hour to the school day), the estimated annual testing cost per pupil ranged from \$700 to more than \$1,000 per pupil in several grades that had the most testing.

If testing were abandoned, one school district in this study could add from 20 to 40 minutes of instruction to each school day for most grades. The other school district would be able to add almost an entire class period to the school day for grades 6-11. Additionally, in most

grades, more than \$100 per test-taker could be reallocated to purchase instructional programs, technology or to buy better tests. Cutting testing time and costs in half still would yield significant gains to the instructional day, and add enough dollars in the budget that could fund tests that are better aligned to the standards and produce useful information for teachers, students, and parents.

Concerns about over-testing are leading to same changes: Texas lawmakers cut the number of high school end-of-course exams required for graduation from fifteen to five. The Orchard Park Central School District in New York passed a resolution proposing that this year's state assessments be used for measuring the state's progress in introducing the Common Core Learning Standards rather than for measuring student performance or educator effectiveness. Lawmakers in New Mexico called for an analysis of the cost, both in instructional time and money, of all student assessments.

What Do High-Stakes Tests Tell Us?

Researchers have repeatedly indicated that the amount of poverty in the communities where schools are located, along with other factors having nothing to do with what happens in classrooms, accounts for the great majority of the differences in test scores from one school to the other (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Dyson & Weddle, 2009; Ferguson, 2007; Howard, 2010; Minow, Schweder, & Markus, 2008; Noguera, 2008; Paige, 2010; Leiding, 2012; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012; Rebell & Wolffe, 2008; Rothstein, 2004; Sachs, 2007). Those other factors include the resources available to the schools as well as the level of affluence of the community in which the school is located.

It is misguided to hold a teacher accountable for his or her students' test scores when those scores reflect all that has happened to the children before they even arrived at the classroom. High-stakes test results tell us about socioeconomic status and available resources not about the quality of teaching that went on in those schools (Lunenburg & Irby, 2006; Rebell & Wolff, 2008; Rothstein, 2004).

Conclusion

A study of two medium-sized, urban school districts' standardized testing calendars indicated that students are being deprived of a full, high-quality education because of pervasive test preparation and testing. Educators know the importance of gauging student learning, and they support the proper use of standardized testing and sensible accountability measures. However, the current test-and-punish accountability system under the No Child Left Behind Act has diminished vital parts of the curriculum that are not subjected to accountability testing, sacrificed student learning time to testing and test preparation, and forced teachers—particularly those teaching at-risk students—to focus their attention on students achieving just below the passing score. That is not what countries with high-performing education systems do. We need a testing system that informs, rather than impedes, teaching and learning.

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